

California warmwater fishing

California's warmwater gamefish include one native species, the Sacramento perch, and 18 introduced non native species. The introduced nonnative fish include largemouth, smallmouth,

spotted, and redeye bass; bluegill, warmouth, and green, pumpkinseed and redear sunfish; white and black crappie; channel, white, blue, and flathead catfish; and yellow, brown, and black bullhead. In

addition to these warmwater gamefish, California anglers also fish for striped and white bass, yellow perch, and in Southern California several species of tilapia. 🐟

Black Bass

The largemouth bass is one of four species of black bass introduced into California. It has been the most popular freshwater gamefish in North America. The native range of largemouth bass included the lower Great Lakes, the central part of the Mississippi River system south to the Gulf Coast, Florida, and north along the Atlantic coast to Virginia. Through introductions, it now occurs in most states in the nation including Hawaii, and has been successfully introduced into several other countries. Largemouth bass were most likely introduced into California in 1891 and, through further introduction, found in most lakes, ponds at below 2,500 feet in elevation. This species does best in habitats with abundant cover in the form of aquatic vegetation, but is able to survive in multi-purpose, fluctuating reservoirs where the only cover is rocks or occasional flooded brush. The largemouth bass is separated into two subspecies, the northern subspecies and southern or Florida subspecies. The California state record was caught at Lake Castaic in 1991 and weighed 21 pounds 12 ounces.

The spotted bass is the most recent addition to California's warmwater gamefish. Two of the three subspecies have been introduced into California: the northern spotted bass, sometimes called Kentucky bass, and the Alabama spotted bass. The latter is the predominate species in California reservoirs. Spotted bass are sometimes confused with largemouth bass but can be easily distinguished by several characteristics. The mouth of the spotted bass is small, like a smallmouth



Largemouth bass



Spotted bass



Smallmouth bass

bass, when compared to the largemouth bass. Another characteristic is the distinct first and second dorsal fins. Spotted bass, again like the largemouth bass, while these fins are distinct in the largemouth bass. Spotted bass coloration is similar to the largemouth bass; however, the body above the lateral line is more even in coloration; the dark line down the side is composed of more diamond like blotches; and the belly area is almost creamy white with a small spot on most of the individual scales. The state record was caught from Pine Flat Reservoir in 1996 and weighed 9.6 pounds.

Smallmouth bass were introduced into the Napa River in the late 1800s from Lake Champlain, New York. California records indicate that anglers "blown out" the first plant and the introduction was considered unsuccessful. Another introduction a few years later into Crystal Springs Reservoir, a water supply reservoir south of the City of San Francisco, was successful and provided an abundant source of smallmouth bass for additional stocking throughout the state. Early on, many of California's low elevation streams and smaller water supply reservoirs provided habitat well-suited to smallmouth bass and construction of large multi-purpose reservoirs in the 1950s and 60s greatly increased smallmouth bass habitat.

These impoundments provide anglers the best opportunity to catch smallmouth bass. The California state record was caught from Trinity Lake in 1976 and weighed nine pounds one ounce. 🐟

P. Lee wrote the warmwater species and species information. He is a senior fisheries biologist in the Fisheries Programs Branch, and statewide coordinator for lake and reservoir fisheries.

Finding and fishing for black bass

For anglers trying to improve their fishing skills, a better understanding of the biology and life history of black bass will go a long way to enhancing angling success. Knowing more about

By Dennis P. Lee

the type of habitat used by bass, feeding habits, and seasonal movements, will help in this understanding.

The largemouth bass evolved in shallow bays of lakes, ponds, and slow moving backwaters of larger streams with an abundance of aquatic vegetation and other types of large cover such as fallen trees and stumps. In California, largemouth are found in most lakes and reservoirs associated with structure (any change in the bottom surface) and cover, although they may be found in open water areas when actively feeding or during migrations. The best fishing time is in the early spring just prior to spawning, but fishing can be good at most other times of the year. In the early spring, shoreline areas leading towards spawning coves and bays are the best locations to find largemouth. Most spawning occurs in the backs of coves or bays near cover. Later in the season, largemouth will move to main lake areas



DFG photo © Robert Waldron

Guides offer a variety of services to both the novice and experienced angler.

such as flooded islands and points. Areas with aquatic vegetation or flooded trees and brush are always good spots to find largemouth bass. All the black bass are opportunistic feeders and artificial lures and live bait that imitates or duplicates natural prey items will usually be the most successful.

Good fishing for spotted bass in California reservoirs begins as early as January and extends through the spring. Spotted bass often dominate late winter catches in reservoirs with good populations. Areas with inflowing water during and after storm events will concentrate "spots" making them easy to catch. Spotted bass favor areas with rocky substrate, and in streams are often found in close association with woody cover. In larger reservoirs, they select areas with rocky, steeply sloping shorelines. The steep upper canyon reaches of many reservoirs are popular areas to find spotted bass. Broken rock slides and vertical rock walls are common habitats and bass often suspend several feet off steep walls at depths to 45 feet.

Smallmouth bass are found in stream habitats as well as lakes and reservoirs. In California, most of the tributaries of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers system

that are below an elevation of 3,500 feet contain populations of smallmouth bass. Most of these stream populations are lightly fished and provide excellent angling opportunities. However, "smallies" in these habitats do not grow as fast or get as big as lake and reservoir populations. In reservoirs, smallmouth bass have a preference for habitats with deep water nearby. Main lake points, vertical walls with broken rubble or rock slides, irregular or broken shorelines, and in many northern California reservoirs, submerged mine tailings are great areas to find smallmouth bass. Trophy-sized bass are often found in areas that provide a combination of these elements in conjunction with large boulders or an old tree stump with a bunch of gnarly roots exposed by erosion. Best fishing for smallmouth bass occurs as water temperatures start to rise in the late winter and early spring until the fish start spawning. Like spotted bass, smallmouth often move to deeper main lake areas after spawning making them difficult to find and catch.

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Sacramento Perch

Sacramento perch originally inhabited sloughs and slow moving channels of the Sacramento-San Joaquin system, the Russian, Pajaro and Salinas rivers, and Clear Lake. Sacramento perch favored the river backwaters and pond-like areas, usually in association with aquatic vegetation. The species was originally

widespread and numerous throughout the Central Valley, but has been eliminated over much of its original range. Today, Sacramento Perch are only occasionally reported from Clear Lake and the backwaters and sloughs of the California Delta.

The largest populations are found in lakes or reservoirs without introduced bass or sunfish. These waters include Crowley Lake (Sierra District), Sequoia and Hume lakes (Sierra District), Lagoon Valley Reservoir (Valley District), and Pyramid

Lake in Nevada. In addition, Sacramento perch are found in a few isolated small ponds throughout the state.

Sacramento perch are usually associated with submerged weed beds and are commonly caught with small artificial lures such as tube baits, plastic grubs, or 1/8 ounce crank baits. Light tackle is preferred as most fish caught do not exceed one pound. The state record is three pounds 10 ounces and was caught from Crowley Lake.

Sunfish



Bluegill

Fishing for sunfish can be easy and fun. Bluegill are the most common sunfish found in California ponds, lakes, and reservoirs. Best populations occur in waters that contain an abundance of aquatic plants. Schools of bluegill are usually found near cover such as flooded trees or brush. Redear sunfish, sometimes called shell crackers, are not as common as bluegill and are found in waters that provide an abundance of clams and snails for food, and a firm rocky substrate. Green sunfish are also found throughout California, but do not reach as large a

size as redear sunfish. They are often found in association with larger rocks, submerged trees, or woody cover. Pumpkinseed sunfish and warmouth are uncommon in California waters and their smaller size and sparse numbers make them the least desirable of the sunfish.

Fishing for sunfish does not require fancy tackle. Any rod and reel matched with four to eight pound fishing line is adequate. Although sunfish can be caught on a variety of small artificial lures, live bait is usually more effective.



Green sunfish

Garden and red worms, and crickets fished under the surface on small hooks with a bobber are readily taken by bluegills while baits fished on or near the bottom will be more effective for redears. Clams are also good bait for redears. Green sunfish and warmouth will be also occasionally caught on the same baits. Small plastic grubs and worms fished on light jig heads will produce lots of strikes and are a great choice for larger redear sunfish. A lightweight surface popper is a good choice for fishing summer evenings on a local pond.



Redear sunfish

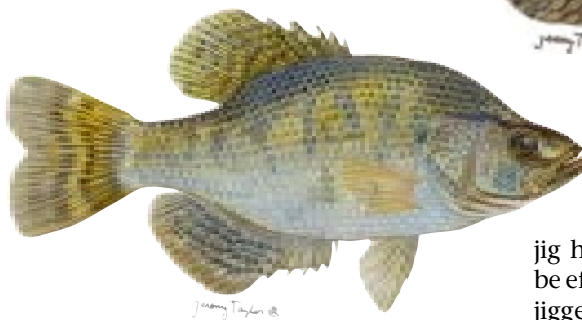
Fish art © Jeremy Taylor

Crappie

Both white and black crappie have been introduced into most California waters. Fishable populations of black crappie can be found in the sloughs and back waters of the California Delta while the white crappie is more common in reservoirs. Both species favor areas with abundant cover in the form of submerged trees and brush, or boat docks.

Crappie fishing is most effective using minnows fished on a light wire hook and bobber around submerged trees or near docks or pilings. Determining the correct depth at which crappie are schooling and presenting your bait at that depth will increase success. Artificial lures such as tube baits or plastic grubs on light weight

Black crappie



White crappie

jig heads that imitate small baitfish can be effectively cast and retrieved or simply jigged in an up-and-down manner.

Yellow Perch

The yellow perch, a member of the perch family, is established in several California waters. Both Iron Gate and Copco reservoirs (North Coast District), and Lafayette Reservoir (South Central District) contain fishable populations of yellow perch.

Small lures such as plastic grubs or tube-type baits fished on light line are the most successful ways to catch yellow perch. Schools of perch can often be located in five to 20 feet of water near aquatic vegetation. Best fishing occurs in the spring and summer.

Tilapia

Tilapia were introduced into Southern California to control nuisance aquatic weeds and insects. They are also reared by aquaculturists as a food fish. Portions of the Colorado River and backwaters, various canals, and Salton Sea drains contain populations of tilapias. In general they are hard to catch because of their wary nature and vegetarian diet.

Catfish and Bullheads

White and channel catfish are common in California reservoirs and the California Delta. The blue catfish is found in only a few Southern California



Black bullhead

waters while the flathead catfish is confined to the Colorado River and adjoining canal system. The brown bullhead is the most common of the bullheads found in California (the black and yellow bullhead are found in scattered localities throughout the state).

Nighttime is the most effective time to fish for catfish and bullheads. They can be caught on artificial, prepared, and live and dead baits. Channel catfish will often strike a moving lure such as a crank bait or jig that imitates a fish or crayfish, but prepared and live baits are usually more successful. Fresh bait such as sardines, anchovies, or nightcrawlers, fresh or frozen bait including clams and shrimp, or commercially available prepared baits will entice any of the catfish species. Most of the time baits are fished on or very near

the bottom using a sliding sinker setup. Location and conditions will dictate the amount of weight necessary for casting and to hold the bait in place on the bottom. Tackle will vary and depend upon the size of fish you expect to catch. Stout tackle and heavy line are often required for trophy-sized channels, blues, or flatheads.



Channel catfish

Striped and white bass

Striped and white bass are members of the temperate basses and considered "cool" water fishes. The striped bass is well established in the California Delta and in a few lakes and reservoirs. White bass are found only in Lake Nacimiento (South Central District).

Fishing for either species is generally best in the spring and fall. In reservoirs, both stripers



Striped bass

Fish art © Jeremy Taylor

and white bass schools and can often be located chasing schools of threadfin shad. In the California Delta and tributaries, striped bass are caught in the spring as they migrate to spawning areas, and again in the fall and winter as they prey on bait fish. Fishing with live bait or lures that imitate bait fish are generally the most successful ways to catch striped bass.

Trophy Black Bass Program

Many waters in California are nationally recognized fisheries that provide anglers the chance for a lifetime catch.

To enhance this opportunity, the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) black bass program manages a number of fisheries for trophy-sized black bass.

In February 1993, the Fish and Game Commission (FGC) established the Trophy Black Bass Program to provide increased opportunities for anglers to catch a trophy-sized black bass in designated waters.

In 1994 the FGC designated Trinity, Oroville, Clear, Isabella, and Castaic lakes as trophy black bass waters. The DFG developed management plans for these waters, and in some instances special

angling regulations that the FGC adopted.

Waters nominated for the program must meet specific criteria. First, the waters have to be open for public angling with unrestricted access or with controlled access consistent with FGC policy. The DFG also considers if the water has historically or biologically demonstrated the capability of producing catches that meet trophy-sized black bass standards with appropriate angling regulations or other fishery management actions.

Second, the DFG manages at least one water in each of its regions as a Trophy Black Bass Water.

Third, the DFG must develop a management plan for each designated water that includes a description and evaluation of the fishery, an assessment

of environmental factors conducive to or limiting trophy black bass management, recommendations for management actions needed to increase abundance of trophy black bass, and an assessment of personnel and fiscal resources needed to carry-out the intent of the program.

The FGC also established a Trophy Black Bass Recognition Program. Trophy-sized black bass are recognized by the following minimum weight standards: largemouth bass, 10 pounds; smallmouth bass and spotted bass, six pounds.

Anglers may submit their catches to the DFG to be recognized as trophy-sized catches by the FGC through letters of recognition, certificates and trophy black bass catch-and-release hat pins.